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    Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. University of Southern California

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Essays in Visual History:
Making Use of the International Mission Photography Archive

NARRATIVE

At the University of Southern California, the Level One Start-up grant from the Office of Digital Humanities supported a two-day workshop for the purpose of conceptualizing and planning *Essays in Visual History*, a series of visually informed compositions that will draw upon an established repository of historical materials: the International Mission Photography Archive (IMPA). While our agenda for the workshop was thus narrowly focused, many of the strategic decisions we needed to make for *Essays in Visual History* will be shared by other humanities projects that seek to incorporate visual materials into scholarly presentations.

a. Background: The International Mission Photography Archive

Essays in Visual History will be a continuing a series of visual essays to be authored by accomplished scholars who use images from the International Mission Photography Archive (IMPA) to explore topics in their areas of expertise. The nearly 100,000 historical photographs presently in the IMPA database, most of them taken between 1860 and WWII, represent cultures across Africa, India, China, Korea, Japan, Oceania, the Caribbean, and Papua New Guinea. They comprise an extraordinary resource for comparative research in the humanities. When fully implemented, *Essays in Visual History* will be hosted by the USC Digital Library and featured on the website of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC).

The model of the visual essay and the idea of an online series of such compositions were conceptualized by the IMPA executive board during a meeting in September, 2010. When it is reduced to its key elements, a successful scholarly essay in traditional print form offers a thoughtful argument focused on a topic in the author's special area of expertise. It features a narrative that is anchored in credible supporting evidence and presented with the intention of encouraging intellectual exchange. This uncomplicated format with all its variations has endured for centuries in print scholarship because it serves its function well. However, the incorporation of visual materials into an essay, a matter of increasing interest in the humanities and social sciences, presents special challenges that ask for innovative forms of presentation. In static print publications, reproduction costs and concerns about rendition quality have often limited the use of visual materials or ruled them out altogether, and even where such materials are encouraged, the relationship between words and images is always attenuated by the static and confining physical limits of the page. Rapidly evolving digital and video technologies offer scholars attractive ways to work around these limitations. When they are published online, compositions that feature visual content can make use of a wide array of recently developed presentation tools, and at the same time, dissemination costs for those compositions are of less pressing concern than they are for print publications. Most important from our perspective, in digital video format an essay's spoken narrative can be wrapped around digitized images much more dynamically than print allows, resulting in a fluid scholarly presentation that is engaging in very different ways.

Taking advantage of these developments, our goal in this enterprise is to initiate a new option for humanities scholarship, namely, *essays in the form of narrated videos that can be quickly and broadly disseminated via a growing variety of web publishing platforms*. Scholarship in the humanities has always relied on the sharing of arguments and commentaries, but perhaps the most critical feature of our project is that *the scholarly arguments and the visual materials and metadata upon which they are based will be equally accessible in the same place, that is, on the IMPA website*. Viewers of the essays, including peer reviewers, can reach into the IMPA database to view an essay's individual images in much greater detail. They can examine the descriptive material attached to the images, search for other pictures that may bear upon the essay's claims, or follow up on ideas of their own that may have emerged as they were viewing the essay. In short, the audience for an essay can directly engage the primary materials that comprise its essential content and thus be drawn into an extensive body of archival resources that might otherwise escape their attention entirely. The essays will also be accompanied by searchable transcripts of their central narratives, bibliographies, biographical sketches of the authors, and timelines and maps that can provide important background context. The USC Digital Library will archive and provide access to the essays so that they remain openly accessible for research and reference. They can be shared by viewers using a variety of social media applications, and we will encourage the authors to participate in public online conversations about the essays they create. For pedagogical use the essays can be incorporated into syllabi; excerpts from them or selections from their constituent elements can be embedded in online presentations and used in lectures and assignments; and instructors can encourage their students to use the video format that we develop to fulfill their required essay assignments for the class.

b. Project Activities

To inaugurate this series, historian Paul Jenkins began work on his prototype essay, "<u>Reading an image in the Other context</u>," in 2011. In July, 2012 that evolving essay served as the focal point for the ODH-funded workshop for the series, supported by a level 1 start-up grant from the Office of Digital Humanities. For the workshop, principal investigators Jon Miller and Matt Gainer were joined by Paul Jenkins and two colleagues from other universities: David Morgan from Duke, and Patricia Lawton from Notre Dame. A third intended participant, Martha Smalley from the Yale Divinity School, was unable to attend the workshop because of a family emergency, but she came to Los Angeles at a later time for a full day of consultation with the principal investigators. Her evaluation of the project and her suggestions for future refinements are represented in this report. From USC, seven faculty members and several graduate students from various departments joined the discussion. In addition to Jenkins' original essay, the outline of a second essay by him and a rough cut of an essay under development by co-PI Jon Miller were also presented and discussed.

c. Workshop accomplishments

The workshop was intended to produce a set of framing parameters for the planned essay series.

Using the three pilot essays as points of departure, two days of conversations yielded the following conclusions and guidelines that will shape the project as we move into the implementation phase:

1. Authoring tools. Our first production efforts represented a trial-and-error process that was labor intensive and somewhat confining. In the interest of cost-effectiveness and consistency, we are now focusing our efforts on building a more accessible set of applications that can be used by a constituency of investigators whose "digital savvy" will range from rudimentary to fairly sophisticated. Research has shown that many investigators will avoid the use of visual materials in the ways we propose if the technical learning curve is too steep. With this in mind, the workshop participants stressed the clear need for a user-friendly toolset that will enable authors in one integrated process to search and select images from the IMPA database, capture the relevant descriptive information (metadata) for those images, and merge those visual materials with the recorded presentation of the essay's narrative core. The goal is to enable an author with moderate technical skills to control as much of the production process as possible, with digital library staff and other technical experts consulting closely on the process and providing technical guidance when it is called for.

2. Multimedia capability. While the toolset developed for the implementation phase must remain accessible to relative novices in the area of digital technology, the workshop also called attention to the need for greater multi-media range, that is, for technical versatility beyond a simple linear video presentation. The early essays will share certain signature framing or "branding" elements and relatively simple technical features, but in time the process will allow more multimedia freedom of form and flexibility of delivery in order to encourage a diversity of authors to address an increasingly wide range of essay topics.

3. Role of the executive board. The IMPA executive board includes individuals with strong credentials as scholars and archivists. They have worked together for over a decade, presiding over the growth in size and range of coverage of the IMPA database. For the essay implementation phase, this group will take an active role in the selection of topics and authors and will be charged with monitoring the quality of the essays as they move through the production and publication process. It is likely that as the essay series matures this group will gradually share these selection and oversight functions with a more broadly-based multi-disciplinary editorial committee.

4. Invited versus open submissions. The early essays carry the burden of establishing the credibility of the series. For this reason, it is sensible to rely on invited scholars for the first group of essays and then later move toward more open invitations through various professional communications channels. Essayists will include both established and early career scholars. In later phases of the project, the eligibility of students working under the supervision of academic advisors will also be considered.

5. Scholarly breadth. To exploit the full richness of the IMPA database, the essay series must be multi-disciplinary, not narrowly focused on topics in religious studies. The production, accumulation, and preservation of the photographs were certainly supported by the religious motivation of the missionaries, but the content of the pictures is by no means confined to religious subjects. It is a historical record of cultural diversity that is of interest

across many scholarly fields. To exploit the richness of the repository, the executive board should encourage scholars from different fields to participate and address a very broad range of topics.

6. Length. Participants in the workshop agreed that fifteen minutes is a reasonable average length for the essays, but that shorter or longer presentations, provided that their quality is high, should not be ruled out as a matter of policy.

7. Relationship to Scalar. USC is home to the Mellon-funded SCALAR initiative, which is building a sophisticated and multi-faceted publishing platform for a range of different types of digital scholarship. The principal investigators from that initiative participated in the workshop and outlined a number of ways in which Essays in Visual History can be integrated into the larger community of digital humanities scholarship. As the project continues we will identify the ways in which the essay series can collaborate with the Scalar initiative in a way that preserves the core strengths of the traditional essay form, which emphasizes careful documentation (footnotes and references where appropriate) and observes rules of copyrights and permissions.

d. Audiences

The planning workshop supported by the grant was convened for the specific purpose of clarifying the outlines, objectives, and methodologies of the visual essays project. The overarching objective was and continues to be the development of proposals for external support. The workshop's list of participants was therefore narrowly defined, as was the intended audience for its deliberations. Broader audiences in the humanities and social sciences and other institutions engaged in those scholarly pursuits will be addressed when the project moves fully into the public implementation phase.

e. Evaluation

At the conclusion of the workshop, all of the participants were asked to provide verbal and written comments on each of the seven topics listed under accomplishments above. It was their feedback that to a large extent shaped that list of conclusions and concerns.

f. Continuation of the Project

The executive board of the International Mission Photography Archive is committed to the implementation of the essay series, and the members of the board continue to publicize the project and encourage investigators to consider contributing to the series. The search for external resources to cover the costs of the project is ongoing.

The USC Digital Library and the Center for Religion and Civic Culture have entered into a formal agreement that assures the security and proper maintenance of the IMPA database. The principal investigators for the start-up grant will oversee the continuing development of the essay

series and will continue to make progress on individual essays as local resources become available. They will approach potential funding sources with grant proposals whenever the opportunity arises. An implementation grant proposal submitted to ODH was not funded; it will be revised and resubmitted, and proposals to other agencies, including private foundations, are under development.

Preliminary discussion of a possible collaborative relationship with the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at the Boston University School of Theology is underway. If such a linkage is established, it will establish a broader base of institutional support for the essay series as well as provide stronger connections to an important multidisciplinary constituency of scholars.

g. Long Term Impact

The long term impact of Essay in Visual History can only be assessed when secure support for the project is in place and a critical number of mature essays have been published. If the series is a success, it will be a continuing source of creative production across a range of visual studies fields. As we envision the essays, they lend themselves naturally to classroom presentation, and assignments encouraging students to produce new essays can easily be built into upper-division and graduate curricula.

h. Grant Products

The inaugural visual essay authored by historian Paul Jenkins has been extensively revised and published on the IMPA website. It is available for viewing at:

http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/vijenkins